

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 EB-08 OMB-01 TRSE-00 AID-05 /080 W

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R 050827Z AUG 77

FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3378

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MANILA 12202

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, PINT, ECON, RP

SUBJECT: CENTRAL MINDANAO: A FRAGILE PEACE

1. SUMMARY: DURING A THREE-DAY VISIT TO CENTRAL MINDANAO, THE CHARGE AND FOUR EMBASSY OFFICERS VISITED THE CITIES OF ILIGAN, MARAWI, AND COTOBATO, AND PARTS OF THE LANA O PROVINCES AND MAGUINDANAO PROVINCE. PROSPECTS FOR PERMANENT PEACE IN THE HEAVILY MUSLIM AREAS ARE PROBLEMATIC. SOME INCIDENTS CONTINUE TO TAKE PLACE, AND ILL FEELING BETWEEN GOP MILITARY TROOPS AND THE LOCAL POPULACE APPEARS TO BE A CONTINUING PROBLEM. THE MILITARY COMMANDER IN THE MAGUINDANAO-COTOBATO AREA CLAIMS THAT MNLF STRENGTH HAS INCREASED DURING THE CEASE-FIRE AND NOW APPROACHES HIS OWN IN TERMS OF MEN UNDER ARMS. THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE OF MEANINGFUL CONTACT OR COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS SPOTTY, BUT CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS APPEAR TO BE MOVING FORWARD WITHOUT OBSTRUCTION FROM THE REBELS. END SUMMARY.

2. FROM JULY 31 THROUGH AUGUST 2, THE CHARGE VISITED CENTRAL MINDANAO, INCLUDING THE CITIES OF ILIGAN, MARAWI AND COTOBATO, AND THE THREE ASSOCIATED PROVINCES OF LANA O DEL NORTE,

LANAO DEL SUR, AND MAGUINDANAO. INCLUDED IN THE PARTY WERE THE USAID DIRECTOR, THE ARMY ATTACHE, AND TWO EMBASSY OFFICERS.

3. TRAVEL AND OTHER ARRANGEMENTS WITHIN THE AREA WERE HANDLED BY ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES (AFP), FOR OBVIOUS REASONS. THIS PLACED SOME LIMITATION ON ACCESS TO A BROAD RANGE OF OPINIONS, BUT DID AFFORD AN EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY TO GUAGE THE ATTITUDE OF THE MILITARY, WHICH IS IN A REAL SENSE PART OF THE PROBLEM. ALMOST UNIVERSALLY, AFP COMMANDERS IN THE AREA REGARD THE CEASEFIRE AS A PERIOD OF PREPARATION FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE, DURING WHICH THE MNLF IS RESTING, RECRUITING, AND CONSOLIDATING BASE AREA. OUR STRONG IMPRESSION IS THAT NO MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES, WHICH CONTINUE TO REGARD ONE ANOTHER WITH SUSPICION AND FEAR.

3. THE MOST HOPEFUL PROSPECTS IN THIS GENERALLY DISPIRITING PICTURE ARE IN LANA DEL NORTE, IN IMPORTANT MEASURE BECAUSE OF AN OVERWHELMING CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN THE POPULATED COASTAL AREAS WITH RELATIVELY SMALL MUSLIM POPULATION (30 PERCENT OF PROVINCE POPULATION) IN THE MOUNTAINS. THE LOCAL BRIGADE COMMANDER, COL. MAGNO (PROMOTED TO BGEN DURING VISIT) SEEMS QUITE CONSCIOUS O HIS RESPONSIBILITIES AS A "NATIONAL BUILDER," AND HAS BEEN EXTENDING EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT PRESENCE BACK INTO THE CONFIDENTIAL

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MOUNTAINS. HE CHARACTERIZES THE PRESENT SITUATION AS ONE OF "RELATIVE PEACE," PUNCTUATED BY SOME INCIDENTS, USUALLY RELATED TO THEFT OF FIREARMS. HE CLAIMS THAT THE PROVINCIAL CEASE-FIRE COMMITTEE, WITH TWO REPRESENTATIVES FROM EACH SIDE, MEETS ONCE A MONTH TO DISCUSS VIOLATIONS.

5. THE SITUATION CHANGES AS ONE MOVES SOUTH INTO LANA DEL SUR, WHERE MUSLIMS ARE ABOUT 90 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION. THE BRIGADE COMMANDER COL LUGA (ALSO PROMOTED TO BGEN) GAVE A GENERALLY POSITIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE PRESENT SITUATION, WITH HIS TROOPS DEVOTING 95 PERCENT OF THEIR EFFORT TO REHABILITATION WORK. OTHER SOURCES, HOWEVER, CLAIMED THAT FEAR AND MISTRUST PERSIST, AND THEY REGARD THE PRESENT HIATUS AS FRAGILE. ONE SERIOUS PROBLEM HERE AND ELSEWHERE IS LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OR RESPECT BETWEEN AFP TROOPS AND LOCAL POPULATION; A FACULTY MEMBERS AT MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSITY STATED THAT TWO SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN MURDERED IN MARAWI CITY IN THE PAST MONTH. A COMPLICATING FACTOR IN THIS PRVINCE IS SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION, WITH RESENTMENTS BUILDING AGAINST THE TRADITIONAL MUSLIM LEADERSHIP, THROUGH WHICH THE GOP OPERATES.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MANILA 12202

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

6. BGEN CASTRO, COMMANDER OF THE CENTRAL COMMAND (CEMCOM), HEADQUARTERED IN COTOBATO, PAINTED A GRIM PICTURE OF THE SITUATION IN HIS AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY, WHICH CONTAINS ABOUT A MILLION MUSLIMS. HE DESCRIBED AT THE KUTOWATO REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE (KRC) AS DETERMINED AND DISCIPLINED, AND ESTIMATED THE NUMBER OF ARMED MNLF TO HAVE INCREASED FROM 10,000 AT CEASEFIRE TO ABOUT 12,000, WHICH VIRTUALLY MATCHES THE NUMBER OF TROOPS IN HIS FOURTEEN BATTALIONS. HE ESTIMATED THAT THE MNLF CONTROLS AS MUCH AS 25 PERCENT OF THE RICE HARVEST, AND CONTINUES TO ENGAGE IN CATTLE RUSTLING. HE CLAIMED THAT THE KRC HAS TESTED HIM IN SEVERAL INCIDENTS SINCE THE CEASEFIRE, AND ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH A MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE HAVE BEEN ABORTIVE.

7. SOME SEE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AS THE LONG-TERM KEY TO A SOLUTION, AND SOME DEVELOPMENT IS INDEED TAKING PLACE. THE CHARGE WAS
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BRIEFED BY THE NATIONAL POWER CORPORATION ON IMPORTANT PLANS FOR HYDROELECTRIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE AGUS RIVER FLOWING OUT OF LAKE LANA O, AND LATER VISITED A GENERATING FACILITY (AGUS VI) AND AN ASSOCIATED CHEMICAL PLANT, AND FLEW OVER AGUS II, CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION. WORK APPEARS TO BE PROCEEDING ON SCHEDULE. IN MARAWI, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE LANA O SUR ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE STATED THAT 20 PERCENT OF THE PROVINCE'S 460,000 POPULATION IS NOW SERVED, AND THAT THE MNLF HAS NOT IMPEDED PROGRESS. THE PARTY VISITED AN ELECTRIFIED SMALL-SCALE IRRIGATION PROJECT ABOUT 25 KM. FROM MARAWI. IN POLLOC, ABOUT 35 KM. FROM COTOBATO, THE PARTY (ESCORTED BY A SIZEABLE CONTINGENT OF SOLDIERS AND ASSORTED ARMORED VEHICLES) VISITED AN ADB-ASSISTED PORT PROJECT, WHICH HAS APPARENTLY NOT BEEN HARRASSED SINCE WORK BEGAN IN JUNE.

8. THE DEVELOPMENT PICTURE IS NOT ALL UPBEAT. SIMEON DATUMANONG, COMMISSIONER OF REGION XII, A SORT OF SUPER-PROVINCE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE, CLAIMED THAT THE AREA IS RECEIVING UPRECEDENTED ATTENTION FROM MANILA. PERHAPS TRUE, BUT CONCRETE EVIDENCE SEEMS TO BE LIMITED SO FAR TO A SUMPTUOUS HEADQUARTERS BUILDING FOR THE REGION XII ADMINISTRATION. DATUMANONG, WHO IS ALSO DESIGNATED DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT (PG) ACKNOWLEDGES THAT THE PG IS GOING NOWHERE UNTIL THE MNLF MAKES A DECISION ON PARTICIPATION. HE STATED, HOWEVER, THAT A SORT OF MODUS VIVENDI HAS BEEN ACHIEVED WITH THE MNLF IN LIMITED AREAS: CERTAIN ROADS WILL BE KEPT OPEN, AND STUDENTS WILL NOT BE PREVENTED FROM ATTENDING SCHOOL. (HE CLAIMED THAT ENROLLMENT HAS DOUBLED SINCE THE CEASEFIRE.) DATUMANONG STATED THAT PRIVATE INVESTMENT HAS BEEN SLOW. CASTRO RECKONS THAT 150,000 HA. OF POTENTIAL FARM LAND LIE IDLE EITHER BECAUSE OF DETERIORATING WATER CONTROL IN THE LOWLANDS OR BECAUSE OF

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A SEVERE REDUCTION IN WORK ANIMALS OVER THE YEARS DUE TO PANIC SELLING AND FIGHTING.

9. FORTHCOMING AIRGRAM WILL COVER TRIP IN GREATER DETAIL.

10. COMMENT: ONE RETURN FROM A VISIT TO THIS AREA IMPRESSED WITH THE INTRACTABILITY OF THE PROBLEM, AND WITH AN APPRECIATION FOR WHAT JOHN J. PERSHING MUST HAVE FELT DURING HIS "PACIFICATION" CAMPAIGNS AROUND COTOBATO 70 YEARS AGO. IN SOME WAYS, THE PRESENT AFP PRESENCE SEEMS ALMOST AS ALIEN AS PERSHING'S FORCES WERE; MUTUAL SUSPICION AND DISLIKE BETWEEN CHRISTIAN TROOPS FROM OUTSIDE MINDANAO AND LOCAL MUSLIMS IS PERVASIVE. VIETNAM IS MUCH IN THE MINDS OF AFP COMMANDERS, MANY OF WHO SERVED IN VIETNAM, AND CASTRO SOUGHT (UNCONVINCINGLY) TO DRAW A CONNECTION

BETWEEN THE MNLF LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNISM. AFTER VISITING
YET ONE MORE ILL-CONSIDERED, IMPRACTICAL, AND LARGELY
SYMBOLIC AFP RESETTLEMENT PROJECT, HOWEVER, WE WOND
WHETHER THE RIGHT LESSONS WERE DRAWN FROM VIETNAM.

11. AS FOR THE PERMANENCE OF THE CEASEFIRE, CASTRO MAINTAINED
THAT IT DEPENDS SOLELY ON THE MNLF, WHICH HAS GIVEN NO
ASSURANCE, AS IF ASSURANCES FROM EITHER SIDE COULD BE
ANYTHING BUT CONTINGENT. AT A LATER LUNCHEON MEETING WITH
A DOZEN MUNICIPAL MAYORS FROM THE COTOBATO REGION, WE HEARD
THAT THE MNLF HAS INDEED ASSURED THEM THAT IT WILL OBSERVE
THE CEASEFIRE. CLEARLY THERE IS EITHER A COMMUNICATION GAP OR
A DIFFERENCE IN ATTITUDE HERE. ASIDE FROM LOGISTICAL
CONSTRAINTS AND GENERAL WEARINESS ON BOTH SIDES, WHICH IS UN-
FORTUNATELY LIKELY TO FADE IN TIME, THERE SEEMS AS YET LITTLE BASIS
ON WHICH TO BUILD A STRONG STRUCTURE OF PEACE.
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